

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me.—Psalm cxxxix, 8, 10.

THE WINGS OF THE MORNING

BY LOUIS TRACY.
Author of "The Final War," "An American Emperor," "The Strange Disappearance of Lady Delia," etc.
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CHAPTER XVII. RAINBOW ISLAND AGAIN—AND AFTERWARD.

Sir Arthur Deane was sitting alone in his cabin in a state of deep dejection, when he was aroused by a knock, and Robert entered.

"Can you give me half an hour?" he asked. "I have something to say to you before we land."

The ship owner silently motioned him to a seat.

"It concerns Iris and myself," continued Anstruther. "I gathered from your words when we met on the island that both you and Lord Ventnor regarded Iris as his lordship's promised bride. From your point of view the arrangement was perhaps natural and equitable, but since your daughter left Hongkong it happens that she and I have fallen in love with each other. No, please listen to me. I am not here to urge my claims upon you. I won her fairly and intend to keep her, were the whole house of peers opposed to me. At this moment I want to tell you, her father, why she could never, even under other circumstances, marry Lord Ventnor."

Then he proceeded to place before the astounded baronet a detailed history of his recent career. It was a sordid story of woman's perfidy, twice told. It carried conviction in its sentence. It was possible, of course, to explain matters more fully to the baronet than to Iris, and Anstruther's fierce resentment of the cruel wrong inflicted upon him blazed forth with overwhelming force. The intensity of his wrath in no way impaired the cogency of his arguments. Rather did it lend point and logical brevity. Each word burned itself into his hearer's consciousness, for Robert did not know that the unfortunate father was being coerced to a distasteful compact by the scoundrel who figured in the narrative as his evil genius.

At the conclusion Sir Arthur bowed his head between his hands and murmured, "I cannot choose but believe you," he admitted huskily. "Yet how came you to be so unjustly convicted by a tribunal composed of your brother officers?"

"They could not help themselves. To acquit me meant that they discredited the sworn testimony not only of my colonel's wife, but of the civil head of an important government mission, not to mention several high-ranking Chinese officials. Am I the first man to be offered up as a sacrifice on the altar of official expediency?"

"But you are powerless now. You can hardly hope to have your case reviewed. What chance is there that your name will ever be cleared?"

"Mrs. Costobell can do it if she will. The vagaries of such a woman are not to be depended on. If Lord Ventnor has cast her off, her hatred may prove stronger than her passion. Anyhow, I should be the last man to despair of God's providence. Compare the condition of Iris and myself today with our plight during the second night on the ledge! I refuse to believe that a bad and fickle woman can resist the workings of destiny, and it was a happy fate which led me to ship on board the *Sir Arthur*, though at the time I saw it in another light."

How different the words, the aspirations, of the two suitors. Quite unconsciously, Robert could not have pleaded better. The ship owner sighed heavily. "I hope your faith will be justified. If it be not—the more likely thing to happen—do I understand that my daughter and you intend to get married whether I give or withhold my sanction?"

Anstruther rose and opened the door. "I have ventured to tell you," he said, "why she should not marry Lord Ventnor. When I come to you and ask you for her, which I pray may be soon, it will be time enough to answer that question, should you then decide to put it."

It must be remembered that Robert knew nothing whatever of the older man's predicament, whilst the baronet, full of his own troubles, was in no mood to take a reasonable view of Anstruther's position. Neither Iris nor Robert could make him understand the long-drawn-out duel of their early life on the island, nor the hatred now proved the tumultuous agony of that terrible hour on the ledge when the girl forced the man to confess his love by suggesting acceptance of the Dyak's terms.

Thus, for a little while, these two were given apart, and Anstruther disdained to urge the plea that not many weeks would elapse before he would be a richer man than his rival. The chief sufferer was Sir Arthur Deane. Had Iris guessed how her father was tormented, she would not have remained on the bridge, radiant and mirthful, whilst the gray-haired baronet gazed with stony-eyed despair at some memoranda which he extracted from his papers.

"Ten thousand pounds!" he muttered. "Not a great sum for the millionaire financier, Sir Arthur Deane, to raise on his note of hand. A few months ago men offered me one hundred times the amount on no better security. And now, to think that a set of jabbering fools in London should so destroy my credit and their own, that not a bank will discount my paper unless they are assured Lord Ventnor has joined the board! Fancy me, of all men, being willing to barter my child for a few pieces of gold!"

The thought was maddening. For a little while he yielded to utter despondency. It was quite true that a comparatively small amount of money would restore the stability of his firm. Even without it, were his credit unimpaired, he could easily tide over the period of depression until the first fruits of his enterprise were garnered. Then, all men would hail him as a genius.

Wearily turning over his papers, he suddenly came across the last letter written to him by Iris' mother. How she doted on their only child! He recalled one night, shortly before his wife died, when the little Iris was brought into her room to kiss her and hush her infantile prayers. She had devised a formula of her own.

"God bless father! God bless mother! God bless me, their little girl!" And what was it she cried to him from the beach?

"Your own little girl given back to you!"

Given back to him! For what—to marry that black-hearted scoundrel whose pastime was the degradation of women and the defaming of honest men? That settled it. Instantly the cloud was lifted from his soul. A great peace came upon him. The ruin of his business he might not be able to avert, but he would save from the wreck that which he prized more than all else—his daughter's love.

The engines dropped to half speed—they were entering the harbor of Singapore.

In a few hours the worst would be over. If Ventnor telegraphed to London his withdrawal from the board, nothing short of a cable draft for ten thousand pounds would prevent certain creditors from filing a bankruptcy petition. In the local banks the baronet had about a thousand to his credit. Surely among the rich merchants of the port, men who knew the potentialities of his scheme, he would be able to raise the money needed. He would try hard. Already he felt braver. The old fire had returned to his blood. The very belief that he was acting in the way best calculated to secure his daughter's happiness stimulated and encouraged him.

He went on deck, to meet Iris skipping down the hatchway. "Oh, there you are!" she cried. "I was just coming to find out why you were moping in your cabin. You are missing the most beautiful view—all greens, and blues, and browns! Run, quick! I want you to see every inch of it."

She held out her hand and pulled him gleefully up the steps. Leaning against the taffrail, some distance apart from each other, were Anstruther and Lord Ventnor. Need it be said to whom Iris drew her father?

Here he is, Robert," she laughed. "I do believe he was sulking because I refuse to believe that a bad and fickle woman can resist the workings of destiny, and it was a happy fate which led me to ship on board the *Sir Arthur*, though at the time I saw it in another light."

"I have been thinking over what you said to me just now, Anstruther," said the ship owner slowly.

"Oh!" cried Iris. "Have you two been talking secrets behind my back?" "It is no secret to you—my little girl—her mother's voice lingered on the phrase. "When we are on shore, Robert, I will explain matters to you more fully. Just now I wish only to tell you that where Iris has given her heart I will not refuse her hand."

"You darling old dad! And is that what all the mystery was about?" She took his face between her hands and kissed him. Lord Ventnor, wondering at this effusiveness, strolled forward.

"What has happened, Miss Deane?" he inquired. "Have you just discovered what an excellent parent you possess?"

The baronet laughed, almost hysterically. "Pon my honor," he cried, "you could not have hit upon a happier explanation."

His lordship was not quite satisfied. "I suppose you will take Iris to Smith's hotel?" he said, with cool impudence.

Iris answered him.

"Yes. My father has just asked Robert to come with us by inference, that is, where are you going?"

The adroit use of her lover's Christian name goaded his lordship to sudden heat.

"Indeed!" he snarled. "Sir Arthur Deane has evidently decided a good many things during the last hour."

"Yes," was the ship owner's quiet retort. "I have decided that my daughter's happiness should be the chief consideration of my remaining years. All else must give way to it."

The earl's swarthy face grew sallow with fury. His eyes blazed, and there

was a tense vibrato in his voice as he said: "Then I must congratulate you, Miss Deane. You are fated to endure adventures. Having escaped from the melodramatic perils of Rainbow Island you are destined to experience another variety of shipwreck here."

He left them. Not a word had Robert spoken throughout the unexpected scene. His heart was throbbing with a tremulous joy, and his lordship's spears were lost on him. But he could not fail to note the malignant purpose of the parting sentence.

In his quietly masterful way he placed his hand on the baronet's shoulder.

"What did Lord Ventnor mean?" he asked.

Sir Arthur Deane answered, with a calm smile: "It is difficult to talk openly at this moment. Wait until we reach the hotel."

The news flew fast through the settlement that H. M. S. Orient had returned from her long search for the *Sir Arthur*. The warship occupied her usual anchorage, and a boat was lowered to take off the passengers. Lieutenant Playdon went ashore with them. A feeling of consideration for Anstruther prevented any arrangements being made for subsequent meetings.

Once their courteous duty was ended, the officers of the Orient could not give him any further social recognition.

Lord Ventnor was aware of this fact and endeavored to turn it to advantage.

"By the way, Fitzroy," he called out to the commander as he prepared to descend the gangway, "I want you, and

any others not detained by duty, to come and dine with me tonight."

Captain Fitzroy answered blandly: "It is very good of you to ask us, but I fear I cannot make any definite arrangements until I learn what orders are awaiting me here."

"Oh, certainly. Come if you can, eh?"

"Yes; suppose we leave it at that."

It was a polite but decided rebuff. It in no way tended to sweeten Lord Ventnor's temper, which was further exasperated when he hurt his shin against one of Robert's disreputable-looking tins, with its accumulation of debris.

The boat swung off into the tideway. Her progress shorewards was watched by a small knot of people, mostly loungers and coolies. Among them, however, were two persons who had driven rapidly to the landing place when the arrival of the Orient was reported. One bore all the distinguishing marks of the army officer of high rank, but the other was unmistakably a globe-trotter. Only in Piccadilly could he have purchased his wondrous sola topi, or pith helmet—with its imitation pugri neatly folded and puckered—and no tailor who ever carried his goose through the Exile's gate would have fashioned his expensive garments. But the old gentleman made no pretense that he could "hear the east a-calling." He swore impartially at the climate, the place and its inhabitants. At this instant he was in a state of wild excitement.

He was very tall, very stout, exceedingly red-faced. Any budding medic who understood the pre-eminence enjoyed by an ad in a prescription,

would have diagnosed him as a first-rate subject for apoplexy.

Producing a tremendous telescope, he vainly endeavored to balance it on the shoulder of a native servant.

"Can't you stand still, you blithering idiot?" he shouted, after futile attempts to focus the advancing boat, "or shall I steady you by a clout over the ear?"

His companion, the army man, was looking through a pair of field glasses. "By Jove!" he cried, "I can see Sir Arthur Deane, and a girl who looks like his daughter. There's that infernal scamp, Ventnor, too."

The big man brushed the servant out of his way, and brandished the telescope as though it were a bludgeon.

"The dirty beggar! He drove my lad to misery and death, yet he has come back safe and sound. Wait till I meet him. I'll—"

"Now, Anstruther! Remember your promise. My vengeance has first claim. What! By the jumping Moses, I do believe—Yes. It is, Anstruther! Your nephew is sitting next to the girl!"

The telescope fell on the stones with a crash. The giant's rubicund face suddenly blanched. He leaned on his friend for support.

"You are not mistaken," he almost whispered. "Look again, my God! I see him. Make sure before you speak. Tell me! Tell me!"

"Calm yourself, Anstruther. It is Robert, as sure as I'm alive. Don't you think I know him, my poor disgraced friend, whom I like all the best, cast off in his hour of trouble? But I had some excuse. There! There! I

didn't mean that, old fellow. Robert himself will be the last man to blame either of us. Who could have suspected that two people—one of them, God help me! my wife—would concoct such a hellish plot!"

The boat glided gracefully alongside the steps of the quay, and Playdon sprang ashore to help Iris to alight. What happened immediately afterward can best be told in his own words, as he related the story to an appreciative audience in the ward-room.

"We had just landed," he said, "and some of the crew were pushing the coolies out of the way, when two men jumped down the steps, and a most fiendish row sprang up. That is, there was no dispute or wrangling, but one chap, who, it turned out, was Colonel Costobell, grabbed Ventnor by the shirt front, and threatened to smash his face in if he didn't listen then and there to what he had to say. I really thought about interfering, until I heard Colonel Costobell's opening words. After that I would gladly have seen the beggar chucked into the harbor. We never liked him, did we?"

"Ask no questions, Pompey, but go ahead with the yarn," growled the first lieutenant.

"Well, it seems that Mrs. Costobell is dead. She got enteric a week after the Orient sailed, and was a general four days. Before she died she owned up."

He paused, with a base eye to effect. Not a man moved a muscle.

"All right," he cried. "I will make no more false starts. Mrs. Costobell

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